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SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN MILITARY: SEEKING PLOTTERS BEHIND
EVERY BUSH

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

11. (C) Summary: The Venezuelan Government and supporters of President Hugo Chavez continue to prepare for a suspected US coup attempt and invasion. Although the Venezuelan Navy chief played down the late February visit of a US Navy vessel at Curacao, Chavez and other GOV officials called it a provocation. According to DAO sources, about 50 civilians rallied at a Maracay airbase March 1 to support the GOV during a minor agitation of anti-Chavez soldiers that the left-wing press described as a military insurrection. The new Venezuelan military doctrine is poised to call for greater civilian involvement in national defense, and reserves may be growing in number and activity, according to Embassy contacts and press reports. Separately, the retirement of armed forces joint command chief Maj. Gen. Julio Quintero Vilorio sparked a series of shifts of senior military personnel, a continuation of the promotion of Chavez loyalists. End summary.

Rumors of US Invasion

12. (U) The February 27 visit of the amphibious assault ship USS Saipan to Curacao--about 40 nautical miles from the Venezuelan coast--sparked rumors that the US was threatening Venezuela. Vice Admiral Armando Laguna, the commander of the Venezuelan Navy, cautioned the following day that what the pro-GOV press billed as the mobilization of "combat aircraft, amphibious ships, and 1,000 marines" was a routine operation.

He reported that Venezuela had increased air and maritime surveillance to confirm US intentions. On 2 March, President Hugo Chavez (visiting Uruguay) called the ship a "provocation," and over the following weekend he reiterated charges that the United States was trying to assassinate him.

National Assembly president Nicolas Maduro led a government and press delegation to Curacao after the Saipan's departure, where he characterized the ship's arrival as a veiled threat at the Venezuelan people. For his part, Army chief Gen. Raul Baduel also took the opportunity to affirm that the USG could resort to killing the President.

13. (U) A group claiming to be institutionalist, active-duty military personnel circulated an email bashing Chavez and praising the US Government and military. The three page letter signed "Comando Operacional Conjunto 507" listed historical US military interventions in the name of freedom and reminded readers that the United States intervened to try to prevent Great Britain from seizing parts of eastern Venezuela (now Guyana) in the 19th century. It closed by describing Chavez as a buffoon who spends Venezuela's riches on countries willing to give him the audience he lacked at home.

"People in Arms"

14. (U) A pro-GOV press report described a "spontaneous" gathering of some 3,000 civilians and cars bearing the slogan "people in arms" at El Libertador airbase in Maracay the night of March 1 to help the military combat an insurrection rumored to be in process. GOV civilian and military officials also made public statements attesting to a disturbance of anti-Chavez soldiers. According to DAO sources, only 50-100 civilians--mainly Tupamaros and Bolivarian Circle members--showed in response to military reports of a minor agitation of anti-Chavez soldiers, and a journalist was detained to ensure the publication of the more alarmist version of events. According to the opposition press version, Maracay mayor Humberto Prieto, brother of former Defense Minister Jose Luis Prieto Silva, rallied the people, warning that the USS Saipan's presence made the threat of an uprising more credible. The activists arrived to witness the mobilization of tanks of the 42nd armored brigade. The armed forces inspector general, Vice Adm.

Orlando Maniglia, later told reporters the tanks were participating in a routine maneuver.

Military Reserves

15. (U) Venezuela's new military doctrine--scheduled to be released this summer--will prescribe the use of "reserves" to augment national security, as promised in 2003-04. Chavista rhetoric is ambiguous about whether these reserves will be military or civilian; Chavez has attended several ceremonies that highlight military reservists, but some ultra-leftists have called for a broader arming of Chavista supporters. One of the chief theorists of the new doctrine is Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Lt. Col. (retired) William Izarra. In late January, the GOV news agency published an article by Izarra outlining the structure of "popular commands" made up of "basic action units" in charge of community defense, supplies, communications, and intelligence collection. During a February meeting with government officials at the armed forces headquarters, Chavez urged supporters to call up retirees and ex-guerrillas, according to a press transcript of his remarks. He expressed hope that mayors could offer garrison commanders lists of local "reservists" with sharpshooting, sniper, and grenade-throwing skills.

16. (C) Such reserves appear to be increasing in number and activity. A private but government-influenced military news website has reported the activation of a new naval reserve battalion under the Venezuelan Marine Corps. A security chief for a US-based company told poloff that he had noticed personnel in civilian attire drilling at the military base in Valencia over the past six months. Representatives of the business organization Conindustria told the Ambassador that their members were under pressure to permit recruiting and training at the worksite.

Command Shuffle

17. (U) The GOV kept staunch loyalists in key positions after the announced retirement on March 4 of Armed Forces Joint Command chief Maj. Gen. Julio Quintero Vilorio touched off a shift of senior officers. (The press cited "unconfirmed" reports that Chavez forced Quintero to retire because he had ordered the Maracay tank maneuvers without authorization.) Chavez shifted most of the officers laterally. Army inspector general (second-in-command) Maj. Gen. Ali Uzcategui Duque, who helped mount the operation that returned Chavez to power from his refuge at La Orchila Island in April 2002, replaced Quintero. Maj. Gen. Wilfredo Silva, head of the first infantry division, replaced Uzcategui, and the Casa Militar chief, Maj. Gen. Virgilio Lameda Hernandez, filled Silva's position. Lameda Hernandez's deputy, Col. Carlos Alcala Cordones, took command at Casa Militar.

Comment

18. (C) The top Venezuelan military leaders are maneuvering to convince the public and the international community that Chavez's invasion and assassination predictions are credible. The Venezuelan military is also operating on the assumption that the threat is real. Chavez will continue to reinforce the high command with proven loyalists, while the focus on establishing a new doctrine to guide Venezuela's military will remain largely theoretical for the time being. Nonetheless, the GOV appears poised to recruit civilians to help defend the revolution, and its contract with Russia to purchase 100,000 AK-47 rifles for fewer than 80,000 active duty personnel could help arm them. Chavez's accusations against the USG are tactical and short-term; his efforts to create an armed, loyalist reserve force are strategic and long-term.
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